

SAN JOSE TAIKO: COMMUNITY BASED, PROFESSIONALLY BASED

BY ROY HIRABAYASHI, FOUNDER, AND
PJ HIRABAYASHI, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR EMERITUS

The art of kumidaiko is the style of ensemble drumming with the taiko (the Japanese drum). It was developed in post-WWII Japan in the 1950's, in which the taiko drum and choreography form the basis of performance. The diaspora of kumidaiko to America was seeded in the late 1960's and early 1970's by entering through the Japanese American communities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose. These three communities are the only Japantowns remaining in the U.S. that spawned the birth of the first three kumidaiko groups: San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Kinnara of Los Angeles, and San Jose Taiko.



We are founding members of [San Jose Taiko](#) (SJT), a community based group formed in 1973 in San Jose Japantown. Since then, SJT has become a professional company while maintaining our essential connection to our community roots. SJT is guided by the practice and discipline of four main principles: attitude, musical technique, kata (form), and ki (energy). An all sensory experience, taiko is energetic,

powerful, and dynamic, incorporating both structure and fluidity through rhythm and movement. SJT has developed a distinctive, contemporary, Asian-American sound that fuses traditional taiko rhythms with music and instruments from around the world.

(see [South Bay Focus](#))



SJT's performances feature visual elements and choreography requiring physical strength, endurance, and energy. Members of the group participate in composing, choreographing, designing and fabricating costumes, and handcrafting the drums. This collective effort produces a performance that highlights group unity and purpose.

“Uplifting! Powerful!”

“You look like you are all having fun! Joyful!”

“You made me cry! I don't know why!”

These visceral responses from audiences, there is no wonder why taiko is gaining popularity throughout the world.

In 1987, SJT became one of the first American taiko ensembles invited to tour Japan. SJT has performed in a wide range of venues, from small community centers and schools to Carnegie Hall. In addition to offering extensive educational and community outreach programs, training, collaborations, and artistic innovation, SJT is currently establishing a Taiko Conservatory, the first of its kind in the United States.



SJT has collaborated with internationally renowned Japanese performing artists including Kodo, Ondekoza, Eitetsu Hayashi, and with artists from other disciplines including Brenda Wong-Aoki, Mark Izu, Eth-Noh-Tec, George Coates Performance Works, Abhinaya Dance Company, Hiroshima, and Keith Terry.

In 1994, SJT was honored by the Arts Council of Silicon Valley with a commendation for community leadership for its efforts to foster cultural diversity in the arts. We were advisors for the first exhibit of North American taiko at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles in 2005: "Big Drum, Taiko in the US". In 2004, the Preservation Action Council of San Jose recognized us for our role in the preservation and revitalization of San Jose Japantown. SJT received the prestigious Foreign Minister of Japan Commendation Award in 2010 for sharing the Japanese culture in the US.



When SJT was first founded, only two other taiko organizations existed in the US. Today, there are hundreds, with SJT as one of the nation's leaders. SJT has also played a prominent role in the North American Taiko Conference (NATC) since its inception in 1997. The 8th biennial NATC was held August 18-21, 2011 at Stanford University, where 500 registered participants and 200 workshop leaders and volunteers gathered. NATC attracted not only taiko practitioners from North America, but also Japan, China, Argentina, Brazil, and the UK---a sign that a viable taiko community is expanding globally. (see [Festival Season](#))



During our early involvement in Asian American community activism, we were introduced to the powerful principles of



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community building that we chose to adopt for SJT's core values. We have worked very hard to develop a holistic art form that embraces artistic excellence while also encouraging SJT members to become leaders and community builders. Emphasizing the core values of equality, empowerment, and expression, we have created a cooperative organizational structure within SJT that we hope will withstand the test of time. All of our successes and challenges have spurred us to design, over the past eight years, a thoughtful plan for SJT's succession of leadership to the next generation. As of July 1, Wisa Uemura and Franco Imperial are SJT's new Executive and Artistic Directors.



The work and development of SJT could not have happened without the generous support of the California Arts Council. In the early years, multicultural arts were an unknown entity. No one understood what taiko was and the term "multicultural arts" did not even exist. Through the dedicated work of many of the staff members at the CAC, SJT was able to grow from a community-based group to an internationally known touring ensemble. Early CAC funding through the Organizational Support Program and then the Multicultural Advancement Program helped strengthen SJT as an organization and helped establish SJT in the presenting world. The CAC Touring Roster was

also important in helping launch SJT as a professional touring ensemble.

We are honored to receive the [2011 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship](#). We feel this award recognizes the work of the larger taiko community and it really should be shared with the many other great taiko players in America.*

SJT has been featured in the [KQED Sparks series](#), KTEH "This is Us!" and the ["Big Drum, Taiko in the US" by the Japanese American National Museum](#). Video interviews with Roy and PJ have been archived by the Japanese American National Museum Discover Nikkei project and Densho, the Japanese American Legacy Project.

[NEA podcast interview](#)

[PJ Hirabayashi video interviews - JANM](#)

[Roy Hirabayashi video interviews - JANM](#)

More information on [San Jose Taiko](#):
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* The Hirabayashis will be going to Washington, D.C. in September to join seven other honorees to receive the nation's highest lifetime award in the folk and traditional arts.



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Photo subjects and credit (in order presented): Early photo of members of SJT at community *mochitsuki*, rice pounding festival, by San Jose Taiko; SJT's 35th Anniversary concert (2008), with PJ and Roy center stage, by X2 Digital Photography; SJT's 20th Anniversary concert (1993) with guest collaborator, Keith Terry, by Mark Coutts Smith; SJT members replacing the heads on a taiko, by San Jose Taiko; SJT's 35th Anniversary concert (2008), in the song Celebration, by X2 Digital Photography; and SJT's 35th Anniversary concert (2008), encore piece with PJ and Roy, by X2 Digital Photography.

San Jose Taiko received early CAC funding through the Organizational Support Program and then the Multicultural Advancement Program. The Presenting and Touring Program also helped strengthen SJT as a professional organization in the presenting world.